

TOPICS OF THE DAY

A BOOK, written in Canada, about Canada, by a Canadian, will this time be my subject.

We all talk of the day when "the great Canadian book" will appear. But those who know the history of literature know too that when it does appear, it will go unrecognized for the most part during a generation at least. Public opinion is quite valueless about such matters, until its own dregs have had time to settle. After that, public opinion is really of some value. The "public" to-day may not read Shakespeare more than any previous public has done; but it has in some manner absorbed into its marrow the critical wisdom of previous generations about Shakespeare. Goethe put it characteristically:

Es bleibt immer gewiss: dieses so verehrte und so verachtete Publikum irrt sich ueber das Einzelne fast immer, ueber das Ganze fast nie.

And so I have no wish to be censorious when I say that so far I have seen only one Canadian review—and that a mere impertinence—of a book by Philip Grove.¹ But I think a number at least of the rather critical company one addresses in the DALHOUSIE REVIEW may be grateful for having their attention called to it. I give it as my considered opinion that *The Yoke of Life* is a great book, and I add that he whose critical capacity I most respect is of the same opinion.

I suppose there were reasons for assigning such a title to it, but they do not reveal themselves to the reader. The book is a novel which carries its hero through adolescence. Its scene is laid partly in a pioneer settlement in the prairies, partly in the lumber woods of the far north, partly in a prairie city—hideous and rich and wicked enough to be Winnipeg, though cities and provinces are not named—partly on a chain of northern lakes. The vastness of prairie geography is part of the atmosphere of the book. But in the main that atmosphere suggests the unremitting struggle of the pioneer on the prairie frontiers; the struggle with nature, with climate, with luck, with usurers, with one's own cowardice, with fate. Whitman chanting "Pioneers! O Pioneers!"

1. *The Yoke of Life*, by F. P. Grove, (MacWilliams).

gave the impression that they were the lords and masters of creation. Grove depicts them as slaves; not the slaves of human masters, but the slaves of the holdings they till. Yet this is not set forth in any bitter way. Slaves though they be, Grove's pioneers have all the nobler qualities of Whitman's, and the best of them are even nobler and wiser. They have all looked into the maelstrom of wage-slavery in the city, and they prefer to be serfs on the land. This is not merely the passion for lonely places Louis Hémon depicted; it is an intuitive economic and moral wisdom.

The book opens with an undergrown and delicate lad of fourteen, sitting on a farm-horse, and talking about a bird he has seen, to a friend. We have a good look at this boy on his ungainly mount, and the surrounding country, before we see anything else. All about, the farm land is just beginning to invade the northern bush. The boy is out searching for cattle. From within a small summer-shack the voice of his friend emerges. He expresses doubt whether such a bird can have been seen in that longitude. The boy is invited to come inside, to see whether he can identify the bird in an illustrated book. Then we see the friend, an elderly scholar, lame, on his teacher's vacation. In these wilds he studies natural history. We feel at once that we are in the presence of a remarkable man. And this man, from his conversation, shows a consciousness that he is in the presence of a remarkable boy. But the boy has never yet been to school, nor learned his letters. A Government school is building in the district, and the boy suggests, in his shy way, that his friend come and teach there:

"I wish you could be our teacher."

"So do I, Len, so do I. It can't be done."

"The school where you teach is much larger, isn't it?"

"It's a high school," Mr. Crawford said, with a sigh. "But perhaps in a few years. . . ."

"You wouldn't care to teach in a country school?"

"It isn't that, Len. On the contrary, I should like it much better than what I am doing. I think the work more important too. You don't understand. It's a question of salary. You see I have children."

"Have you?" the boy asked shyly.

"Yes, two boys. They are nearly grown up. They are at college. When they finish there, I might be able to do what I should like to do, and that is, teach boys like yourself."

In the conversation which follows, the boy's ambitions and fears emerge. It is part of his fate that just when the provincial school has overtaken the settlement he should be of school-leaving

age. Len doubts whether his step-father will send him to the new school:

"What do your sons learn at college?"

Mr. Crawford gave a short laugh. "Not much. They might learn many things. All that the great men of the past have thought and written."

"About the world, and other countries, and about God?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to do that. What is a great man?"

"One who has thought and known more, and more deeply, than others."

"So that he can make inventions?"

"That too. Though the greatest hardly do that."

"What do they do?"

"They explore the human heart and mind, and help other men to understand themselves."

Then the boy, fearing he is late, hurries off looking for the cows, amusing himself with childish antics on his steed, and succumbing to childish fears in the dusk, before he finds the animals. It grows dark. The coyotes are howling in the distance. The moon rises before the thirsty herd are driven into the farm-yard. A younger brother helps to pump water into the trough. One has left high philosophy, and is back to the chores of the prairie pioneers.

These pioneers, be it observed, are nearly all "foreigners". The hero is German, of a German-speaking household; many of the neighbours are Germans, Swedes, Russians. One has to go south, to the older parts, to see much evidence of "Canadianisation". Yet the author, himself of Swedish-Scottish extraction, who has spent most of his adult life among them, quite evidently believes that these people are the very salt of Canada. It is noteworthy, too, that the Britishers who appear in these pages seem to have no racial animosity against them. But Britishers and Uitlanders all seem to hate, and certainly to despise, "Canadians" of the kind who live in the cities. The book is full of politics—not the thing which usually goes by that name—but the realities of Canadian life.

Two and a half years after the opening of the book, Mr. Crawford is actually installed as teacher in the pioneer school. His two sons are now off to the war, and he is free to take up his mission, having refused university preferment to do so. Len is at school, learning pot-hooks and geometry at once. Remarkable man and remarkable boy are brought together as teacher and pupil. But after six months the boy has to leave school. A year's absence, then Mr. Crawford persuades the step-father to let him return,

at least during the winter months. So the struggle with the land goes on. Meantime Len has met his fate among women. Pot-hooks, poverty and sex assail the unusual lad all at once. And he has a predisposition to consumption! It looks like a grim fight for Len, like tragedy.

On the farm things never go too well, but when they are "hailed out" it means that in the following winter Len, now 18, must go north to work in a lumber camp. (His lover meantime has gone to a small town, as a domestic servant). Nothing could be more vivid than the description of the lumber camp, 16 miles from the railway. Too light in build for any other work, Len becomes cook's assistant. He sends all his wages home, and at first studies diligently the books Mr. Crawford has given him. Then one or two of the men round him make him curious about their past. He neglects his books and begins, with the eye of a naturalist, to study life. It is through Len's eager eyes that we see the strange and strangely assorted characters in these log shanties. Men of all nationalities and of many professions! Besides coming from a remote pioneer homestead, Len is very backward in development. It is here in this lumber camp that he first learns what life means. It both fascinates him and repels. Books and an education for years have been the Heaven to which he aspires. They now begin to seem less important. From things he hears and sees among his more debauched companions, he grows anxious about his lover. Her letters torture him. In a few weeks he observes that she has changed. From the first, though the girl is sketchily drawn, we see that she is much more mature than her admirer. The gloom thickens for Len. Meantime his old teacher, with whom he corresponds, is confirmed in his opinion that Len is a genius. Len cannot spell, nor write good English, but he can describe the world around him, and its diversified characters.

In the spring Len returns home a man. He finds his lover a painted worldling, has grave and vague misgivings, but his fate draws him on. He becomes more or less formally engaged to the woman who has already deceived him. Contact with his old friend, Mr. Crawford, draws him back to his books, and though he works hard on the farm (whose fortunes he has saved for the time being by his winter wages) he writes his "Entrance Examination" and passes "first in the province". He gets this news one Sunday morning, and rides off to tell his sweetheart. Looking, in the barn of her employer, for a place to stable his horse, he sees, unseen, his Lydia with three young men, and overhears a conversation that rocks his soul. While he stands amazed she sees him, spurns him,

and that night elopes to the city with a man whose evil character Len well knows. The tragedy of the book is that Len cannot clear himself from his Fate.

Disaster dogs the farm. This year the crops are good, but the very rain that makes them prosper backs up into a swampy slough, and destroys the horses. Len undertakes to buy a yoke of oxen, so that the wheat can be cut, and when the grain is finally stacked he treks south, working at threshings and sending money home. When threshing is done he walks to the great city, and takes the first work that offers,—as a coal-heaver. It is somewhat easier than farm-work. He studies, saves money, and sees city life from the outside only. There is not much humour in the book, but one bit of excellent and delicate satire, when Len presents himself with a letter to a former pupil of Mr. Crawford's, now a prosperous school "administrator". Here the teacher's seed has fallen on the usual stony ground. And so we have the proper, conventional, self-seeker, Mr. Pennycup, full of glib phrases about the agricultural problem, face to face with Len Sterner, trucking coal six days of the week, and smelling of the stable even on Sunday when he pays his call; the practical saviour of the pioneer farm; unlettered, but wise; completely a visionary, despite his terrible disappointments! It is such contrasts and foils as this that help us to realise what a tense quality Len's greatness has. It is the sort of greatness, as Aristotle might say, that makes Len a tragic character. He now encounters an associate of the lumber camp, whose weakness he already knows, and, for the moment, is irresistibly attracted to his company. Half-unsuspecting, he is taken among evil women, but temptation merely revolts him. He thinks of his former lover, and flees. The horror of it all, in his physical condition, makes him ill. He lies delirious in hospital, no longer sending the regular remittances home. Consequently the creditor Jew swoops down on his step-father, and he has to leave the farm (the land of which belongs to the step-sons) and become a wage-earner in town.

Another love story now comes in, that of Len's younger brother. He "batches" on the farm, and soon after marries, for Len has recovered and returned, promising assistance. Len's ambition now is to establish his brother, by clearing the farm of all debts. He will go back to his work in the city. Besides, he knows that Lydia must somewhere be there, and he will continue his search for her. After long searching, and on the eve of another attack of pneumonia, he suddenly does come upon her. He is ill, half-delirious; she helps him to his room, and next day gets a doctor and begins to nurse

him through a long, delirious illness, supporting herself and him—though he cannot know it—by following evil ways. When his delirium ends, he thinks his illness has been a short one, and that the savings he has turned over to her have sufficed for them, and for the doctor's fees and medicine. His discovery of the truth, and the tragedy that ensues, are as grim a study of Fate as one might expect from any Scandinavian writer.

Perhaps most readers will not accept the ending of the book as "convincing", to use the stock term. But the author lets us understand plainly that this tense, visionary youth, with the mark of Death on him from the first, and now recovering from a long illness, who has more than once been caught up into high places by the sage who teaches him, only to be cheated of his ambition for a schooling, is now half-demented by his sufferings. The schooling he has been content to let go, but from his Fate with Lydia he cannot get free. Nor can he live with her. They agree to die, as others in even less tragic circumstances have done. But Len must see his old master once more, and this meeting is the most terrible thing in the book. For the old man is dying, and hardly recognizes Len. When he does, at length, he expresses his old hope that Len will write a book:

"I have been twice ill . . . and have given up," Len replied. "But I came once more to thank you for all you have done for me." His voice shook.

The old man gave an appallingly senile nod, and sank back. "Reading and writing are one way to beguile one's time. I haven't the leisure any longer, I have my accounts to settle with God. That is the final thing you come to at last. There's a new craze abroad, I hear, radio! Telephone, telegraph, railways, air-planes, gramophones, cinema, radio,—all of a kind. Pretty toys. To create them we have made half the world of men into slaves—slaves that till the field, and slaves that fire the engines to turn the wheels. There's only one state of society where you can do without slaves; where all men are free because they live in voluntary poverty and simplicity. And that you find in the wilderness only."

"The wilderness," said Len, to break the silence that fell. "That is where I am going."

Thus, almost at the end, these two, the youth tortured to insanity, the kind old sage in senile despair. But the pioneer farm, now the property of the younger brother, has won through. And the step-father, with the mother of the boys, is back on the land once more, clearing the lot taken up by him years before, and temporarily abandoned, half out of love, and half out of pity for the widow. (The step-father, by the way, is the best drawn character in the book).

I daresay few women readers will admit that Lydia's character has any reality. But the author, I think, wants us to see Lydia as Len sees her, and of course he sees her in no real way at all. Light-headed and light-hearted, she is no way good enough for Len. But the mother's instinct in her makes her kind to him, just at the moment when Len's belated adolescence dawns. A long separation almost at the beginning of their innocent friendship causes them to make vows to each other, before either of them understands or can understand the other. The serious, high-minded boy takes the vow very seriously; the shallow, selfish and irresponsible girl likes his admiration, but likes the admiration of others as well. Years later, the maternal instinct surges up in her again when Len swoons away on meeting her. She cannot leave him in his delirious condition. She nurses him back to life. From this time on, she seems quite characterless herself; the greatness of Len now sweeps her away. She is merely part of him, part of his utter, life-destroying despair.

Greatness is always so lonely! One of the charming features of the book is the affectionate friendship between the brothers. But Charlie cannot help Len in any real way. He is just the ordinary, healthy, high-spirited boy. He admires Len and loves him, but he has no glimmer of insight into his tragedy. He accepts Len's money, accepts Len's share of the farm, marries, and lets Len heave coal in the city, after the first bout with pneumonia, as though it were the reasonable and proper thing to do. And so, for a person of Charlie's understanding, it is. The step-father understands Len much better, but he is far too obsessed with the work to be done in the world to do anything else than snatch at his step-son's assistance. As for Len's mother, pioneer life has degraded her to the instincts and cunning of the vixen.

It was said once that the reason we get so few good books is that so few people who can write have anything to say, and that so few who have anything to say can write. Now it is obvious that the person who is going to write well of Canada must know much. A vast commerce with books will be indispensable, but even more indispensable will be a wide commerce with the world, and a profound, and hence imaginative, insight into life. I once heard Henri Bourassa laughing at the politicians and journalists who talk of a race question in Canada. "Why, we have fifty race questions in Canada, and it may not be fifty years before some of them will require to be answered." Not only is Mr. Grove's knowledge of European races, languages and histories exceptional; he has also studied their settlers in Canada as few other educated men

have done. I have met missionaries to these north-west settlements, and journalists who had been among them all. But most missionaries and journalists in Canada are illiterate. Mr. Grove's knowledge of flora and fauna, geology and meteorology is just as striking. And, with it all, he has the observing eye of the poet.

So much for his having something to say. The question remains, can he write? Can he put a book together? Has the artist mastered his material? There are flaws in the writing. One reader, who admired the book very much, especially the opening and the scenes in the lumber camp, asked me whether the style was "deliberately uncouth". Others have remarked to me on occasional awkwardness and harshness of sentence structure. This, indeed, mere good proof-reading would have saved us. But that is a trifle, and hardly to be mentioned in the discussion of Mr. Grove's accomplishment; it is not characteristic, I think, of his style. I am much struck, however, by the epithet "deliberately uncouth". The author of the epithet himself has lived in the outer marches, and sees the incongruity of frontier life described in over-fine writing. The utterances of Mr. Crawford, quoted above, are in a good English style. But how is Len's mother to be made to speak? Nay, how are thoughts in the groping trend of Len to be expressed? As Lysias knew, men must be made not merely to speak, but even to think, in character. We may as well admit it, for the last generation we have been not civilising, but barbarising ourselves on this continent. A Die-hard in the matter of the decencies, I think I should admit that the polished language of the *salon* is not the language to describe Le Pas, Manitoba, nor Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia. These western peasants of ours are not like Hardy's peasants, steeped in music and in the language of a great book. Besides, Wessex, Germany, perhaps Russia itself, is a sort of Eden compared with the rude northern Canadian wilderness, once axe and plow have gashed it, and after uprooted and bewildered men have settled in it. But the wilderness and its conquerors Mr. Grove takes as he finds them, loves them both, and so writes as man writes best,—out of a great sympathy and love.

C. S.